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How to cite:

Plastow, Christine (2018). Staff-Student partnerships in pedagogy and research-based education: lessons for Classics. Council of University Classical Departments Bulletin 47.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2018/02/PLASTOW-Staff-Student-Partnerships-in-Pedagogy.pdf>

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Staff-Student Partnerships in Pedagogy and Research-Based Education: Lessons for Classics

by Christine Plastow

In 2015, the UCL Arena Centre for Research-based Education launched its R=T ('Research equals Teaching') initiative. At that time, I was in the midst of my PhD in the Greek and Latin department at UCL. I was also teaching both Greek and Latin language to undergraduates for the first time; as a teaching assistant, this consisted primarily in guiding students through a prepared translation each week. While I noticed innovative teaching practices going on all around me in literature and history classes, languages seemed to be lagging behind, bogged down in traditional teaching methods. So when I saw the R=T initiative's call for student editors to collaborate on their forthcoming book - a set of pedagogical materials on research-based education - I jumped at the chance to get involved and hopefully learn something that I could bring back to my own classroom.

The task of R=T was to produce scholarly materials to support UCL's Connected Curriculum initiative, which aims to forge stronger connections between research and teaching activities at the university. Scholars in the Arena Centre argue that the main mode of learning in undergraduate degree programmes should encourage students to see themselves as researchers by reflecting the type of active, critical, and analytic enquiry necessary for research and common among established researchers. Such an approach would not only encourage students to engage in their own and pre-existing research projects, but would also employ methods from the additional trappings of the research process, such as peer review, dissemination of findings, and public engagement. The mode of production of this work of pedagogy, though, was to be its particularly innovative aspect: the aim was to make the students whose education was being discussed active participants in the research and writing of the project by having them work in true partnership with staff. This would mean that students and staff would work collaboratively towards a collective goal, with power and opportunities distributed more evenly than in a traditional 'student helper' situation. The aim was to promote an exchange of ideas about education at all levels within the university-

from first-year undergraduates up to senior management-in order to change a culture of ‘top-down’ teaching.

In practice, this meant that staff and students on the R=T project co-organised workshops and focus groups; students designed questions to interview staff in order to guide these larger group sessions. Collaboration continued in writing up reports on the pedagogical outcomes of focus groups, though students produced the bulk of the text; these reports would go on to form the meat of the finished book. At this point, I began my role as a student editor. Our task was to pull out key points from the staff-student partnerships’ findings in order to create the R=T Framework, a set of guidelines for implementing research-based education in partnership with students across the HE sector. Using this framework, we then wrote responses to each chapter, connecting the individual discussions closely with the guidelines produced by the whole project.

But how does all this apply to Classics? This was the question I found myself asking as the only Classicist on the project; many of the case studies and suggestions seemed at first glance to be much easier to apply in a science or social science classroom. The chapter that I was assigned was on the use of technology in research-based education. In ancient language teaching this is often made difficult by a lack of appropriate resources, and, in the case of Greek, the relative difficulty for students to type in the Greek alphabet without an extended set-up period. As I note in my contribution to the book, ‘a lack of resources may be an issue: technology [and its development] can be expensive and funding difficult to secure, particularly in fields where it is not viewed as “essential”’ such as Classics. This does not, though, mean that we may ignore the lessons learned in other fields, and in practice it may simply be the case that we need to employ some creative thinking to see how the findings of a project like R=T can be applied to the Classics classroom.

Indeed, if we take the five pedagogical themes of the book as a framework, we can find plenty of room for staff-student collaboration in research-based Classics education. The first theme is perhaps the most easily applicable: the aim to connect students with staff research activities and outputs. Designing courses around staff research interests is nothing new, though we might consider whether this truly ‘connects’ students with staff research; we might seek ways to use the classroom as a research space, ensuring that students receive adequate recognition and opportunities from such activities. Pedagogical research would perhaps be the most obvious avenue for such a model, as in the R=T project itself, though students could also be encouraged to see each course as its own collaborative ‘research project’ with their peers as well as their teacher. The second theme focuses on transcending disciplinary boundaries, and while the call for interdisciplinary work has resonated through the realms of research applications for some time now, there is certainly value to be had from extrapolating the approach downwards, whether through student research projects taking place across faculties, or even undergraduate courses designed in the liberal arts mode to encourage Classics students and other Arts and Humanities students to

work together on the same topics, both from the ancient world and later. The third theme, connecting students with the workplace, is perhaps more difficult for Classics, where research-based work is difficult to come by, though projects that encourage undergraduate students to work with staff in heritage or museum settings will certainly be valuable where possible. The fourth theme, involving teachers and teaching assistants more actively in large group teaching, may also be less relevant to Classics (at least in the UK) where very large lecture sizes are not often seen, at least in my experience; but the true aim here is to continue to promote active learning among students rather than passive absorption of knowledge, and thus we should remember to avoid traditional lecturing where a more collaborative and engaging route can be taken.

The fifth theme was the one that I found most application for in my language classroom: peer-assisted learning. I drew on the findings of the focus groups on this theme to design an activity for my Greek prose composition class. I split students into pairs, gave each a sentence or two from the translation passage, and asked them to write their Greek translation. Each pair then swapped with another, and translated their Greek sentence back into English. The groups then came together to compare the original English and the re-translated English, and to settle on more accurate Greek translations where necessary. Finally all of the Greek sentences were re-compiled into the passage, resulting in a passage translation produced collaboratively with peer feedback on translation accuracy and fluency. Students not only found this method of passage translation far more engaging than if each of them had prepared their own translation individually, but I also found from discussions amongst the groups that they were thinking more deeply and creatively both about the ancient Greek language and the act of translation in both directions. A more light-hearted end-of-term version of this activity saw student groups selecting their own 'popular' English texts to compose in Greek, mostly pop songs and nursery rhymes, with their opposite groups having to decipher their efforts. These activities encouraged students to think of ancient Greek as a language for communication rather than a set of vocabulary and grammar rules to be learned, which in turn helped them to treat the language as a tool for research.

Working on the R=T book project was rewarding for me as an individual teacher of Classics, even when it took some creative thinking to invent ways to achieve research-based education in my language classroom, and I think that the findings in the final publication will have fruitful applications in Classics. But particularly important was the way in which the project revealed the potential successes of student-staff partnerships, both for pedagogic research and publication projects, and in practical teaching environments. Inviting students to take a more leading role in their own education greatly encourages active learning, and can also help to produce students who not only feel like they have had a hand in shaping the future of higher education, but who gain valuable additional skills during their studies that allow them to leave university with a more critical, problem-solving, and ultimately research-oriented

mind-set. Staff-student collaboration, both in teaching and scholarship, can and will have extremely positive effects for Classics.

Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Teaching and Research, edited by Vincent C. H. Tong, Alex Standen and Mira Sotiriou, will be published by UCL Press in March 2018.

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